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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [PREL](#) [BO](#)
SUBJECT: WOMEN LEADERS DIVIDED ON POTENTIAL FOR WOMEN'S
MOVEMENT

REF: MINSK 312

Classified By: Ambassador Karen Stewart for reason 1.4 (d).

Summary

1. (C) In a recent lunch with Ambassador, several prominent women leaders praised the creation of a newly formed U.S. NGO-sponsored women's network that seeks to promote both women and democracy in Belarus. However, a number of prominent women leaders were quite discouraged about the network's ability to unite women or to affect change. Arguing that women would not work together without either a strong unifying theme or the carrot of western funding, they predicted a dim, short future for the network. While it appears that the network will not attract all women leaders, post views initiatives that aim to bring women leaders together in an effort to work for democratic change in Belarus as positive developments. End summary.

Creation of Women's Network Formalized; MOU Signed in Kyiv

2. (C) In a meeting with Poloff on June 21, Belarusian Women's League Head Nina Stuzhinskaya reported that the leaders of 15 Belarusian women's groups met in Kyiv over June 16-17 to formalize the creation of the U.S. NGO NDI-funded women's network in Belarus (reftel). During the conference, the women leaders signed a memorandum of partnership in which they agreed to work together to enhance the role of women in all spheres of society and to promote democratic change in Belarus. Their stated goals are to increase the influence of women on social and political problems in the country, promote gender equality, and defend women's interests. In addition, the participants created a platform with an action plan for distribution among the general public in order to advertise the network's goals and future projects.

3. (C) The participants also established a general council and a governing board. The general council, which includes a representative from each of the participating women's groups, is responsible for setting the direction and activities of the network. The governing board, which has one representative from each of the regions in which the women's groups operate, was designed to be a more flexible, quick-response body that will meet regularly to implement the general council's directives. Stuzhinskaya told Poloff that the participants agreed to reconvene in Kyiv at the beginning of July to report on what resources each group is able to contribute to the network and to set the action plan for the following year.

Some Women Leaders Are Optimistic About Network...

14. (C) Lamenting the small role of women in national politics at a recent lunch with Ambassador, Women's Independent Democratic Movement Head Lyudmila Petina praised the creation of a women's network and a broader women's movement as means to increase women's influence in Belarus. Kobrin Women's Club "Bona" Head Alla Sapezhinskaya told Ambassador that such a network would give women a chance to shape civil society and to encourage women to work together to overcome the fear that usually prevents them from defending their rights. Stuzhinskaya viewed the network as a means to distribute information about themes that are important to women and to encourage solidarity amongst pro-democratic women. (Note: Petina, Sapezhinskaya, and Stuzhinskaya -- obvious strong supporters of the women's network -- all attended the recent founding conference in Kyiv. End note.)

...Others, However, Dismiss Potential of Women's Movement

15. (C) United Civic Party Deputy and NGO Human Rights Alliance Head Lyudmila Gryaznova, however, was very pessimistic about the prospects for creating a united women's movement, especially given the lack of a common goal or purpose to unify women. She noted that women need a strong stimulus to become active. Therefore, Gryaznova believes there is a better chance of uniting Belarusian women in efforts to solve concrete social problems than convincing them to become members of an amorphous women's network -- a "social club" as she called it -- that lacks purpose and direction. When Poloff suggested democracy promotion as a

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possible unifying theme for the network, Gryaznova countered that since the entire opposition wants democracy, there was no sense to further divide the group into separate men and women pro-democracy camps. Gryaznova also added that past attempts to organize women's movements failed and left a bad impression on Belarusians.

16. (C) Belarusian Association of Women Lawyers' Chairperson Galina Drebezova argued that it would be impossible to form a national women's coalition that was unified around a common theme because no universal women's issues exist in Belarus. She claimed that each region has its own unique set of issues thereby making it next to impossible to find common national issues to unite all women leaders.

17. (C) Belarusian Organization of Working Women Head Irina Zhikhar told Poloff on June 22 that women leaders worked well together during the 2006 presidential election because everyone shared the common goal of trying to remove President Lukashenko from power. Zhikhar claimed, however, that the nascent women's coalition that had formed during this time would have collapsed after the elections if NDI had not pledged funds for its continuation. According to Zhikhar, Belarusian women, if left to their own initiatives, would not come together to create such a movement, which indicates to her that the donors are more interested in the success of the network than the members.

18. (C) Gryaznova recommended that women leaders should focus their efforts on changing Belarusians' mentality and stereotypes about women through information campaigns. She also suggested that increasing foreign support, both financial and moral, for emerging and current women professionals, particularly in the fields of education, literature, and journalism, would do more to promote women leaders than the current network.

Comment

19. (C) Getting Belarusian opposition leaders to come to a consensus and coordinate continues to be an obstacle. Post notes the important role a common goal or event can play in bringing people together but sees no reason why democracy promotion could not be that theme. Despite allegations about some women leaders' motives for participating in the network, post considers the network to be a positive development and we will continue to support initiatives that aim to bring established and up-and-coming women leaders together in an effort to work for democratic change in Belarus.
Stewart